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MERCEDES SALVADOR-BELLO
*Isidorean Perceptions of Order: the Exeter Book Riddles
and Medieval Latin Enigmata.*
West Virginia University Press, Morgantown, WV, 2015, 512 pp.

Mercedes Salvador-Bello's *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: the Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata* is a significant contribution to a recent upsurge of scholarly interest in Isidore of Seville and his reception in the medieval West.¹ In particular, the role of Isidore as a source in Anglo-Saxon England has been the subject of several studies,² and the present volume can also be placed within this frame of reference.

Salvador-Bello's monograph is the first book-length investigation into the subtle yet fascinating correlation of Isidorean encyclopaedism and heuristic categories with early medieval riddle tradition, itself an aspect of medieval literary culture the import of which Salvador-Bello does much to highlight. In particular, this book aims to contextualise the Exeter Book Riddles, the only pre-Conquest English vernacular collection, within the tradition of early medieval Latin riddling in the attempt to solve one of the crucial and yet largely overlooked puzzles posed by this collection since at least since K. Sisam,³ namely the compilation process and organizational patterns of its thematic sections. The chief claim of *Isidorean Perceptions of Order* is that, lying beneath the rather conspicuous idiosyncrasies of the Exeter Book riddle collection, an order is indeed detectable and it is one of a distinctively Isidorean brand, in that the Exeter Riddles fundamentally adhere to the thematic and structural criteria established by the major late antique and early medieval Latin riddle collections and ultimately derived from the encyclopaedic tradition, in general, and from the most influential encyclopaedia of all, Isidore's *Etymologiae*, in particular.

The contents of the book are distributed into three expansive chapters framed by a comparatively brief introduction and the final conclusions. Chapter 1, *Introduction*, outlines the subject of the book, namely the Exeter Book Riddles, the major late antique and early medieval collections of Latin *enigmata*, and the thematic as well as organizational parallelisms with Isidore's *Etymologiae* pervading the latter and also detectable in the former.

Chapter 2, *Early Medieval Riddling and Isidore's Etymologiae*, provides an overview of the early medieval Latin riddling genre from the seventh to the eleventh century as well as a convenient survey of Isidore's biography and oeuvre, with a special focus on the *Etymologiae*, in the context of Visigothic Spain, and, finally, an insightful assessment of the decisive impact of the Isidorean encyclopaedia on the riddling genre both content- and structure-wise. In tracing the evolution of the genre in the early Middle Ages, two crucial geographical and chronological points are made: riddling production gained an extraordinary prominence in the British Isles and it developed in two successive stages. The former, from the late seventh to the mid-eighth century, proved a veritable

¹ A number of miscellaneous volumes have been published on Isidore in the last decade, such as Elfassi, Ribémont (2008); Andrés Sanz *et al.* (2008); Velázquez, Ripoll (2015); Fear, Wood (2016).

² See the publications by Di Sciacca (2002, 2007, 2008), and Hussey (2004, 2005, 2008).

³ Sisam (1953, p. 97).

“golden age” of Latin riddle production and was probably triggered by Aldhelm in England and then spread to the Continent in the wake of the cultural exchanges fostered by the Anglo-Saxon missions. The latter, from the mid-tenth to the mid-eleventh century, followed an inverse route, as old and new riddle collections were (re-)exported from Continental Benedictine foundations to their Anglo-Saxon counterparts to sustain the educational programme of the English monastic reformers. However, these two major phases in the history of early medieval riddling should not be interpreted as discrete moments, since evidence of the continuing interest in this genre in the ninth century can be found in Alcuin’s corpus as well as in anonymous compilations. More relevantly, the Exeter Book Riddles themselves attest to this continuity in riddle production as “the language of the greater bulk of the Exeter Riddles suggests that these texts also derive from [the early] stage” of the riddle genre (pp. 53-54), while the actual codex containing the Exeter collection was copied and assembled in the second half of the tenth century and eventually donated by Bishop Leofric (d. 1072) to the newly founded episcopal see at Exeter to furnish the library there, thereby showing that “riddles were also probably much valued later in the post-reform context of the eleventh century” (p. 29). Throughout the evolution of the riddling genre, “Isidore’s *Etymologiae* [no] doubt played a decisive role”, in that not only did the riddle collections draw on them as an encyclopaedic source and imitate their etymological technique, but also derived from Isidore’s encyclopaedia “internal organizational patterns” (p. 87).

An outline of the organizational criteria of Isidore’s *Etymologiae* is provided in the first part of Chapter 3, *Isidore’s Etymologiae and the Compilation of Early Medieval Latin Riddle Collections*. The subsequent analysis of the seven major Latin riddle compilations, namely the *enigmata* authored by Symphosius, Aldhelm, Tatwine, and Eusebius as well as the anonymous or hybrid collections known as the Bern and Lorsch riddles and the Vatican Collection, shows that the Isidorean encyclopaedic patterns were deliberately imitated in the thematic sections making up such collections (although it should be noted that Symphosius, author of the earliest and seminal collection of *enigmata*, very likely predates Isidore).⁴ Typically, these sections would encompass at least cosmological, biological, and instrumental subjects, according to the fundamentally binary arrangement underlying the second decade of the *Etymologiae*, namely the *Opera Dei*, including any being created by God, and the *Opera hominis*, including any human product. Important subcategories within the biological realm would in turn consist of zoological, botanical as well as prodigious clusters, or, within the instrumental sequences, of writing groupings. Interestingly, these sequences would sometimes include smaller thematic units, i.e. pairs or triplets, arranged according to the principles of analogy and difference, two of the four categories (*analogia*, *differentia*, *glossa*, and *etymologia*) which, originally established by antique grammarians, became Isidore’s chief epistemological tools and were “exploited *ad infinitum* throughout the *Etymologiae*” (p. 441). The Isidorean encyclopaedic design that guided the selection and assemblage of the large amount of data inevitably involved in riddle compilation “leaves no room for doubt that [riddle] compilers sought a similar storage effect to that discerned in encyclopaedias” (p. 84). In sum, “medieval Latin [riddle] collections were conceived as encyclopaedias on a small scale” (p. 441).

Chapter 4, *The Compilation of the Exeter Book Riddles*, aims to investigate the Old English assemblage with “a significantly different approach” (p. 209). Whereas previous scholarship has generally focused on individual riddles thereby failing to view the collection as a whole, Salvador-Bello’s explicit aim is now “to provide an overall view of

⁴ Another problematic chronology is that concerning the relative dating of Bede’s *De orthographia* and the *Liber glossarum*, the mutual relationship of which is discussed by Salvador-Bello (p. 72). See also Dionisotti (1982) and Gribomont (1979).

the compilation of the Exeter Riddles” (p. 291). What follows is indeed a painstaking and insightful analysis of the three large groups making up the collection as we know it, which — the author proposes — is the result of a three-step compilation process. In the first stage, a source collection thematically and structurally very cohesive and heavily influenced by both Symphosius and Aldhelm, was copied as an entire block into the current Group 1, i.e. Riddles 1-40 (although this would-be source collection could have consisted of a few more riddles now lost due to two lacunae affecting Riddles 20 and 40). Secondly, the first batch was expanded with pieces from another source to produce current Group 2, i.e. Riddles 41-59, which, in spite of its many anomalies, is governed by the encyclopaedic principle of analogy. Finally, a third set of riddles was added making up present-day Group 3, i.e. Riddles 61-95, the most miscellaneous and erratic of the three sequences. Indeed,

“[t]he possible reusing of some pieces from Group 1, the abundant cases of repetition, and the presence of numerous textual errors and imprecisions found in Group 3 all confirm the [assumption] that this last part of the collection was ruled by improvisation and the need to comply with the traditional century”. (p. 446)⁵

In conclusion, in spite of the anomalies especially evident in Groups 2 and 3, the Exeter Riddles collection overall exhibits “the observance of structural patterns akin to those detected in the Latin collections and Isidore’s *Etymologiae*” (p. 11) and can therefore be placed within the same learned tradition. As argued earlier in the book, early medieval riddling developed within a subtle interplay with grammar, glossaries, bestiaries, and encyclopaedias (pp. 74-84), and riddle collections “became an ideal vehicle for didactic and instructional purposes” (p. 448), in that they allowed authors to convey knowledge of a variety of disciplines into a compact literary format. In the context of late tenth-century England, the Exeter Book Riddles proved instrumental in the educational programme fostered by the Benedictine reformers and their production is indeed located “in a reform-oriented scriptorium, most likely Canterbury” (p. 449), though other reformed centres, such as Glastonbury, Winchester, and Exeter itself cannot be ruled out.

The volume is complemented by ten useful appendices, an exhaustive bibliography, and an index which, though detailed, doesn’t always reflect the wealth of topics featured in the book. In her in-depth analysis of primary sources and comprehensive synthesis of secondary literature, Salvador-Bello indeed accomplishes an almost Isidorean undertaking and one can probably put it down to the challenging scope of her task if some implications are not fully explored, as when stating the special popularity of riddling in the “British Isles” and referring to the “Insular” tradition of *enigmata*, the distinctiveness of the Irish context, its relationship with the Anglo-Saxon one, and the role of Hiberno-Latinity on a seminal riddle author such as Aldhelm do not seem to be addressed. Similarly, some possibilities are not pursued far, as when the very concluding pages briefly raise the prospect that there could be a secular and entertaining dimension to riddling as well as the monastic and educational one.⁶ Indeed, the emphasis on the didactic potential of riddles, while intriguing, sometimes risks overlooking how patchy our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon curriculum and pedagogical practices still is and that glossed books (as the manuscripts containing riddles often are) are not (always)

⁵ See also Orton (2016).

⁶ On the secular and ludic character of the riddling genre, see Murphy (2011), Orchard (2014), and Wilcox (2014). The ludic character of early medieval *enigmata* has also been explored in papers presented at the latest Settimana di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo (*Il gioco nella società e nella cultura dell’Alto Medioevo*, Spoleto, 20-26 April 2017).

synonymous with class-books.⁷ The copy-editing has not been flawless, leaving, for example, some faulty syllable divisions in Latin words and could perhaps have assisted the author more in the final polishing of the manuscript.

Having said that, this remains a landmark study, which, while exhibiting an impressive command of previous scholarship, puts forward compelling and forceful new one. It is a fruitful resource that will predictably have a significant impact on Isidorean studies, the history of the riddling genre, and the literary culture of Anglo-Saxon England. Of the latter, Salvador-Bello does much to further our understanding as an essentially bilingual culture⁸ and one in which not just Isidore's works but his very categories of knowledge played a crucial role.

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⁷ See Lendinara (1999, pp. 1-2 and 5-6, 2002, 2007).

⁸ Another two recent monographs exploring the interaction and shared context of Anglo-Latin poetry and Old English verse are Steen (2008) and Thornbury (2014).

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